



Clarifying Collaborative Roles in Urban High Schools

General Educators' Perspectives

Christopher Murray

How do schools and districts encourage collaboration among general and special education teachers? The process isn't easy, even in schools with adequate resources. However, teachers working in schools located in high-poverty urban environments may be faced with numerous obstacles that make implementation of effective collaborative practices even more challenging. This article presents one strategy that may help teachers initiate and maintain effective collaborative relationships in high-poverty urban environments. (see box, "What Does the Literature Say About Collaborative Teaching?").

Background and Schools

The following process was used to assist general education teachers at the secondary level in understanding, planning for, and initiating collaborative relationships with special education teachers.

This process was implemented in three Chicago public high schools as part of a grant project sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) entitled the "Chicago Teacher Collaborative." This 3-year personnel preparation project focused specifically on general education teachers; the collaborating team designed the project to provide general educators with knowledge and skills related to special education. All training activities took place at

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three high schools from 1999 through 2002, and about 40 general education teachers participated in the activities. Social studies, English, mathematics, science, and art teachers have partici-

pated in the program, and these participants had varying levels of experience ranging from 1 to 25 years.

Schools in high-poverty urban environments were deliberately selected for this project because of the need for greater training related to special education in such environments. Recent reports in Chicago suggest that such environments contain the greatest number of unqualified and underqualified teachers (Grossman, Beaupre & Rossi, 2001). The schools participating in this project

- Were located on the south and west sides of Chicago.
- Contained large populations of students receiving free or reduced lunch (80%-90%).
- Included large numbers of students of color (95%-100%).
- Reported large proportions of the student population receiving special education services (20%-29%).
- Were either currently, or had recently been placed on academic probation by the school district. (Note: At the time of these activities, schools within the city were placed on academic probation when approximately 80% or more of their student population did not score at or above national average on standardized measures of achievement.)

The project was school based, and a university faculty member (the author) and a project staff member attended each school weekly. During these visits, these project personnel worked with teachers within their classrooms, met with teachers during planning periods, and on some occasions also met with teachers for lunch. In addition, each week a 1 to 2-hour meeting was held at each school, and the participating teachers met with the two project staff members to discuss various topics related to the project's goals. These meetings took place for an entire school year with each group of teachers, and all teachers were paid for their participation. All meetings were teacher-centered in the sense that the university project staff members briefly presented an issue or topic (about 20 minutes) and then encouraged teachers to discuss the ways in which each topic affected their lives

What Does the Literature Say About Collaborative Teaching?

Finding ways to promote and support collaboration between general and special education teachers is a national priority and a desirable goal in almost every educational environment (Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). Numerous books, videos, and journal articles have been devoted to this topic, and these works provide theoretical frameworks, practical instructions, and empirical findings related to the importance of collaborative practices (Appl, Troha, & Rowell, 2001; Cook & Friend, 1995; Friend & Cook, 2003; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001; Pugach & Johnson, 2002). Collaborative practices are valued for the positive influence they can have on student learning in inclusive settings and for their influence on teachers' sense of efficacy, professionalism, morale, and dedication (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989; Firestone & Pennel, 1993; Hobbs & Westling, 1998).

Despite the benefits of collaborative practices, many teachers have reported experiencing difficulties when working collaboratively (Idol, 1997; Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). Some of these difficulties may stem from inadequate school- and district-level structures and supports (e.g., shortages of qualified teachers, lack of common preparation time for teachers, lack of administrative support for these practices, poorly conceived schedules, etc.) as well as more

proximal issues related to resistant attitudes among some educators, poor communication among collaborating teachers, personality conflicts, and a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities within co-taught classrooms (Cook & Friend, 1995; Crane & Iwanicki, 1986; Fennick & Liddy, 2001). Such challenges may be particularly acute at the secondary level where increased emphasis on specialized content, faster instructional pacing, sophisticated scheduling and programming, and resistant attitudes among some teachers can inhibit effective inclusive practices (Cole & McLeskey, 1997; Dieker, 2001; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001).

Many general educators, particularly those working at the secondary level, are faced with obstacles that can impede effective collaborative practices (Cole & McLeskey, 1997; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). Additionally, general education teachers need to be provided with opportunities to clarify their understanding of collaborative practices, their understanding of the roles that special educators *can* assume in collaborative relationships, as well as opportunities to develop further understanding about their own role in promoting and sustaining collaborative practices in schools (Coombs-Richardson & Mead, 2001).

as teachers. Broadly, the meetings focused on four areas:

1. General topics related to special education services and the characteristics of students with disabilities.
2. Social-emotional development and classroom management.
3. Instructional strategies for diverse learners.
4. Professional collaboration.

Six meetings a year were devoted to the topic of "Professional Collaboration." Data presented here were drawn from completed teacher projects

related to developing collaborative relationships (e.g., the creation of lists of issues related to collaborative practices), audio recordings of teacher meetings, and teachers' weekly reflections. Teacher reflection sheets contained three prompts:

1. What new insight or insights did you gain at this meeting?
2. What aspect of this insight could you implement during the upcoming week?
3. What are the specific steps you will take to implement this insight?

Teachers completed these sheets at the end of each session.

Barriers to Effective Collaboration in Urban Schools

Many barriers can inhibit effective collaboration in high-poverty urban environments. Some barriers stem from broader needs within large, under-funded school districts that serve high numbers of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, many urban schools suffer from a lack of sufficient resources and a mismanagement of resources, which can negatively affect the number of teacher vacancies, teacher qualifications, and the availability of time for collaborative planning. All the schools participating in this project did not have adequate resources considering the populations they served. All the schools had shortages of teachers and employed teachers who were not qualified to teach the subject area or areas in which they were assigned to teach. A shortage of qualified special education teachers in these environments was particularly common, and it was not unusual for schools to have three or four special education teacher vacancies, which on average represented approximately 20% of the special education teacher positions at each school. In most cases these vacancies were staffed by substitute teachers, but in some cases other teachers within the schools were asked to fill in these vacancies by adding additional courses to their schedules, further limiting their availability to participate in collaborative practices.

In schools that serve large populations of students living in poverty, these issues can present even greater challenges for several reasons. First, many schools in high-poverty urban environments serve a greater proportion of students with disabilities than do schools in other environments (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Approximately 25% of the students at the three schools participating in this project received special education services. This proportion far exceeds national averages of approximately 11% for children and youth between the ages of 6 and 17 years as well as Illinois averages of

approximately 12% for the same age range (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Because of this overrepresentation, many general education classrooms within these schools served large populations of students with disabilities. Further, because there were clear shortages of qualified special educators, many of these general education classrooms received little or no support from special educators, which placed an enormous burden on the general education teachers.

Second, an overrepresentation of students with disabilities within these schools also created problems for the special education teachers. The administrative burden associated with special education (i.e., testing, individualized education program (IEP), meetings, paperwork, and other caseload responsibilities) was huge in these schools because

- Large numbers of students in these schools received special education services.
- There were shortages of qualified special education teachers to complete these responsibilities.

Therefore, qualified special educators who *were* working in these schools were responsible for these added responsibilities and often had less time to devote to classroom instruction and collaborative practices.

A third issue facing many teachers in high-poverty urban schools is that they often serve large populations of students who are not labeled as having special needs but are experiencing academic failure (Martinez, Banchero, & Little, 2002). At the time these activities took place, the proportion of students who met or exceeded state standards on standardized assessments of achievement in the three schools was 13% in reading (10%-15%), 10% in writing (7%-17%), and 7% in mathematics (0%-11%; Illinois School Report Card, 2001). Across the three schools, approximately 46% of eligible students took the ACT and the average ACT score was 15 (15.0-15.5). Therefore, in addition to serving large numbers of students with disabilities, teachers in these schools were also responsible for designing educational practices that addressed the

social, emotional, and academic needs of many youth who were experiencing academic failure.

Finding ways to enhance collaborative practice in environments characterized by inadequate resources, unqualified and underqualified teachers, and an overrepresentation of students with disabilities and of students struggling academically is a daunting task. Teachers in such environments are struggling to manage *basic* routines. They often receive little administrative support and are usually blamed, both implicitly and explicitly, for students' poor academic performance. This creates a context of frustration and, in some cases, hopelessness. Teachers in such settings often become isolated from one another, become fiercely competitive for scarce resources, and rarely have time to develop and sustain meaningful and effective collaborative relationships with other teachers.

A Few Assumptions

These schools did not have adequate resources, and this work is not meant to suggest that initiating collaborative relationships can be accomplished successfully without adequate resources. Instead, we assumed—and all the participants realized—that they did not have adequate or appropriate resources; and our goal was to continue with few additional resources.

In addition, this work took place within the current national context of inclusive school practices and within the local context of Chicago. In recent years, the Chicago Board of Education has implemented a number of policies and programs designed to increase the number of students with disabilities in general education environments, stemming from the *Corey H* settlement agreement (*Corey H v. Board of Education of the City of Chicago*, 1998). As a result of these initiatives, collaborative team teaching and the increased integration of students with disabilities in general education environments was a reality. The teachers participating in this project had little room to negotiate the value, importance, or underlying philosophical assumptions related to the practice of integrating students with disabilities

into general education environments, and they had little choice related to having special education teachers attend their classrooms.

These issues raise important questions about the way collaborative practices and inclusive school practices are implemented. Many theorists, researchers, and practitioners have suggested that an important starting point in any collaborative effort is a shared vision and mission statement regarding the importance of collaborative practice as well as a vision for the form and shape of collaboration (Cook & Friend, 1995; Dieker, 2001; Friend & Cook, 2003; Idol, 1997). Ideally, this vision or philosophical framework is the result of *joint planning among stakeholders*, including teachers, parents, administrators, and students. In addition, a critical component of any effort designed to increase collaborative practices is *allocated time for collaborative planning* (Cook & Friend; Nolet & Tindal, 1994).

Unfortunately, such options did not exist for these teachers. They did not spend time developing philosophical frameworks, and they did not have time in their schedules for planning with the special educators who attended their classrooms. Therefore, project activities were designed to serve several purposes. The first goal was to provide general education teachers (i.e., project participants) with additional training related to special education because they were already serving large populations of students with disabilities. With regard to collaboration, the goal was to provide these educators with an opportunity to conceptualize what collaborative practices could look like in their classrooms and then make some attempt at initiating these practices with special education teachers who were already attending their classrooms.

Training Sessions

The training sessions related to collaboration began with a general discussion of current levels of collaboration at each site. Because inclusive school practices have increased in Chicago in recent years, most participants had some experience working with special education teachers in their classrooms. In the

schools participating in this project, special education services provided within general education classrooms were referred to as “collaborative team teaching.” Collaborative team teachers (CTTs) are special educators assigned to work in general education classrooms that contain students with disabilities who have general education classroom support minutes included on their IEPs. Despite having had some experience

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working with CTTs, many of the general education teacher participants reported having only limited understanding of CTT roles and, for the most part, these general educators were not satisfied with the level of support they were receiving. A statement made by one of the participants illustrates this point but also recognizes the dynamics of collaborative partnerships:

In most cases, CTTs play a passive role and only assist in classroom management and tutoring. They play the role of a teacher's aide, but both partners in the relationship should share the blame. General education teachers rarely make CTTs feel comfortable and do not go out of their way to welcome their [CTT] input.

Step 1: Developing Dream Lists

Because many general education teacher participants had only limited understanding of CTT roles, the first thing participants at each school were asked to do was to create “dream lists” of what they would most like from special educators working within their classrooms. The intentions in asking teachers to create such lists were twofold. First, creating exhaustive lists

would provide teachers with opportunities to develop philosophical frameworks related to collaboration, which the teachers could then discuss, reflect on, modify, and eventually implement within their classrooms. We were also interested in developing further understanding about the needs of the general educators at each site. Figure 1 shows some initial “dream lists” from the three sites.

Because we implemented these activities at three schools with six different groups of teachers over the 3-year period, this list contains items developed by different teacher groups. In most cases, however, these items overlapped and were included by all teacher groups. In addition, items in this figure are included as they were originally listed. Therefore, in some cases the list includes redundant items. These items fell into four broad categories:

- Planning for Instruction.
- Implementing Instruction.
- Classroom Management.
- Other Classroom Business.

Step 2: Modifying Dream Lists

After developing these initial lists, teachers spent one session viewing the video *The Power of Two* (Burrello, Burrello, & Friend, 1996), and they also read an article entitled “Co-Teaching: Guidelines for Creating Effective Practices” (Cook & Friend, 1995). These works provide an overview of strategies related to improving collaborative practice, examples of several models of collaborative practice, and recommendations for different problems that can occur when working collaboratively.

Following this activity, teachers spent two sessions discussing the viability of their own dream lists and modifying their lists. This process took

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Figure 1. Summary of Dream Lists

Question asked of participants: What would you most like from a CTT or special education teacher?

Planning Instruction

- * Collaborate and meet with the teacher (general educator) at least 1 time per week to work on short- and long-term planning.
- * Provide me with some type of background information on each student with an IEP in the class.
- * Develop an understanding of the material (content) that will be covered in the class.
- * Meet about curriculum and students' needs in class.
- * Collaborate about lesson plans.
- * Review some of my lessons with me.
- * Talk about accommodations for students.
- * Share ideas (positive and helpful).
- * Modify my lessons to better meet the needs of specific students.
- * Review my (general educator's) strategies and the effectiveness of those strategies for students with disabilities.
- * Work with me on developing assessments.
- * Share ideas about grading system.
- * Help assign students' grades.
- * Share grading responsibilities.

Implementing Instruction and Classroom Activities

- * Show up on time and regularly.
- * Encourage students.
- * During projects, help with modifications.
- * Inform me of whether or not students are reaching their full potential in my classroom.
- * Actively present or teach material.
- * Assist with instruction and tutoring.
- * Take over the class once in a while, and let me learn from you (i.e., the CTT or special education teacher).
- * Do quality checks of students during lessons.
- * During class, walk around the room providing assistance, monitoring student work, and redirecting students who are not on task.
- * Assist students during reading activities.
- * Work with my most needy students in a small group.
- * Assist group of special education students with note taking during lessons.
- * Pull students out and work with them individually.
- * Model dialog or intellectual discussions with general education teacher during class so students can learn that skill.
- * Give one-on-one assistance to students who need it.
- * Help individual students understand and complete work.
- * Work one-on-one with students.
- * Test students who need extended time.

Classroom Management

- * Get to know all of the students.
- * Understand that special education students are the priority but not the only responsibility.
- * Know the classroom rules and policies.
- * Help with classroom management and behavior problems.
- * Consistently and actively reinforce standards of positive behavior.
- * Take an active role in classroom routines (e.g., attendance, contacting home, grading).
- * Consistently praise students.
- * Feel free to intervene when there are behavior problems in the classroom.
- * During conflict situations, either take over the class or go into the hall with the student.

Classroom Business

- * Arrive to class on time and regularly.
- * Provide me (general educator) with a schedule of times you will be in the class and consistently follow that schedule.

Note: CTT = collaborative team teacher; IEP = individualized education program.

approximately 2 hours. First, teachers met in pairs to collapse redundant items, remove unrealistic items, and consider items that they had not initially included. Pairs of teachers then presented their recommendations to the entire group at each site, and further modifications were made through deliberation.

Figure 2 shows the types of items teachers included on their final lists. Notably, after initial activities and discussions, all teacher groups added a new section to their lists related to their own actions. This section highlighted actions that general educators can take to promote effective collaboration in their classrooms.

Step 3: Meet with CTTs to Discuss Lists

The fifth meeting involved planning meetings with special education teachers to discuss their final lists. Because our intention was to promote and enhance collaborative practices, all teachers considered the potential for alienating special education teachers when they approached them with a list of items they had been developing. Therefore, in most cases, general educators approached special educators, told them that they had been working on lists, and asked them if they were interested in creating similar lists before meeting with them. In other cases, general educators asked special education teachers to meet with them, described the activities that they had been participating in, and asked the special education teacher what they thought of the lists. In both cases, teachers were sensitive to the possibility that other people might consider these lists as mandates, and they discussed ways to avoid alienating the CTTs. Because participating teachers had limited planning time built into their schedules, these meetings were not specifically directed through the project. Instead, teachers initiated these meetings independently in ways that accommodated their schedules.

Step 4: Reflection

The final meeting with teachers was devoted to reflecting on their meetings with special education teachers.

Overall, the participating teachers expressed positive outcomes from these meetings; however, almost all participants expressed concerns about environmental constraints related to planning time. The following comments provided by different teachers illustrate this point:

I need to make sure I communicate my lesson plans with my CTT teacher in advance and I talked to Ms. Jenkins about my lesson plans for the rest of the year. I wondered, however, when we would have the time to get together to discuss these things regularly.

Another teacher wrote, "To fully utilize a special education teacher in a setting with a general education teacher, a great deal of time is needed for planning and refining teaching styles."

Despite problems related to time constraints, many of the teachers recognized the importance of continuing to work on enhancing these relationships. Of particular note is the effect that these activities had on teachers' personal attitudes and practices. As one teacher observed

We met and agreed that we need to find a way to communicate with each other. Even though we don't have a common planning time, I think I need to start putting copies of my lesson plans in her mailbox and notes asking her to help with certain activities, or notes asking her if she has any input on lessons.

A comment made by another teacher further illustrates this theme, "I have worked on changing some of my own habits to make accommodations for [CTTs]. I presented teachers with two units in advance and asked special education teachers to help me modify both units."

Benefits and Challenges of This Process

The collaborative activities described in this article can be implemented in a relatively short period of time, and teachers and administrators working in schools that have limited resources can benefit from their use because the activ-

ities provide teachers with a starting point related to collaborative practices.

One of the strengths of this approach is that it provides general education teachers with an opportunity to think about collaborative practices in a realistic way. By providing teachers with an opportunity to develop a list of their ideal situation (dream lists) and by having them then reflect on the practicality of these lists, teachers develop a deeper understanding of the process of collaboration as well as the roles of special educators in urban schools.

This process also provides general educators with an opportunity to think about the ways in which they themselves can support collaborative practices. In the process of conceptualizing collaborative practices in their own classrooms, teachers are forced to attend to their own attitudes, beliefs, and practices. For the teachers participating in this project, this process resulted in the creation of a list of actions that they needed to consider when working with special education teachers. The fact that such considerations were decidedly absent in initial dream lists suggests that this process led to a greater awareness among general educators about the role they play in inhibiting and promoting collaborative practices.

In addition to these strengths, this process revealed several challenges that should also be recognized and addressed in future efforts. First, this project focused exclusively on general education teachers and, in the process of initiating these activities, it became obvious that including special education teachers in the activities related to conceptualizing this important educational approach would have enhanced the project's effectiveness. Therefore, future efforts should include both groups of teachers.

Second, teachers participating in these activities clearly felt that they had inadequate amounts of time scheduled for collaborating with CTTs. Finding ways to integrate opportunities for developing further understanding about collaborative practices *with* increased amounts of regularly scheduled plan-

Figure 2. General Educators' Revised List of Expectations

General

- * Understand that students with disabilities are the priority but not the only responsibility.
- * Get to know all of the students.
- * If possible, provide me with a schedule of times that you will be in the class.

Planning

- * CTT and general education teacher should meet to discuss general classroom content, lesson plans, and classroom activities at least 2 times per month.
- * Provide me with a deeper "arsenal" of strategies for working with diverse learners by discussing strategies for helping students, by modeling effective teaching strategies, and by discussing strategies that are effective in other classrooms.
- * Provide some type of background information on each student with an IEP in the class.
- * Look at long-range lesson plans and provide suggestions for how these plans can be carried out in ways that benefit students with disabilities.
- * Give suggestions for modifying tests and collaborate on grading decisions.

Delivering Instruction

- * If possible, share teaching responsibilities and present lessons.
- * During class sessions, walk around the room and provide assistance to students, monitor student work, and provide me (general educator) with feedback regarding student performance and lesson plan effectiveness.
- * Provide more intensive support to students who need a lot of assistance (i.e., one-on-one and small group).

Classroom Management

- * Consistently and actively reinforce standards for positive behavior.
- * Take an active role in developing and implementing classroom routines.
- * Consistently praise students.
- * Feel free to intervene when there are behavior problems in the classroom.
- * During conflict situations either take over the class or go into the hall with the students involved in the conflict.

Things I (General Educator) Need To Work On

- * Provide you (CTT) with some resources related to content.
- * Open avenues of communication by being open and taking risks.
- * Try to prepare instructional blocks (i.e., broad instructional goals) at least two weeks in advance
- * Offer a time to meet to discuss activities.
- * Provide you (CTT) with opportunities to actively present lessons.
- * Share responsibility and power in the classroom.
- * Make it clear to students that they can refer to either of us and that our decisions carry the same "weight" in the classroom.
- * Ask for and utilize collaborating teacher's ideas, opinions, and creativity.
- * Try to remember the importance and value of different perspectives.
- * Provide you (CTT) with a work space/personal space in the classroom.

Note: CTT - collaborative team teacher; IEP = individualized education program.

ning time would undoubtedly improve the effectiveness of this process.

Finally, as stated previously, these activities were funded through an OSEP Personnel Preparation Training grant. For teachers and administrators working in high-poverty urban environments where scarce resources are the norm, providing teachers with opportunities to develop further understanding about collaborative practices will require creativity, commitment, and flexibility. Such efforts are necessary, however, because they provide opportunities to make the best use of those resources that do exist.

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